ACRE INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS - SUMMARY

The Action Committee on the Rural Economy

Rural Saskatchewan – proud communities that welcome and embrace change. Working together as responsible stewards of the environment, we have healthy and diverse rural communities where people of all ages choose to live and work. A network of successful farms, communities and business enterprises is the foundation of our strong rural economy. We offer a competitive business environment that ensures our continued prosperity.

ACRE's vision speaks to the determination of making rural Saskatchewan vibrant where individuals, communities and businesses are proud and prosperous and support a robust rural economy. It is a vision that ACRE believes will be a call to action to halt the crisis situation in which rural Saskatchewan finds itself: where out migration has resulted in families, particularly the youth, moving to urban centres and other regions of the country to find opportunity.

Rural Saskatchewan is poised on a precipice. There is **no option but change**.

We must work towards a Rural Saskatchewan that is synonymous with "opportunity".

The summarized recommendations that follow are directed at the Government of Saskatchewan. ACRE believes that by implementing these recommendations, the government will provide an enabling environment where individuals, communities and businesses can build a robust economy that also provides a lifestyle cherished by so many people. We have also included the six interim recommendations that were made to the Government of Saskatchewan on January 25, 2001.

The recommendations approved by ACRE, were the work of eight sub-committees and have been summarized and categorized into six major areas:

1. **Competitiveness:**
   - Tax
   - Regulations
   - Labour & Immigration
   - Investment
   - Diversity

2. **Skills Development**
   - Education & Training
   - Mentorship

3. **Infrastructure:**
   - Transportation
   - Utilities
   - Irrigation Development
   - Water-Waste Management
   - Land Use
   - Organizational Assistance

4. **Sector Specific:**
   - Agriculture Sector
   - Rural Manufacturing and Construction
   - Health and Emergency Services
   - Energy Sector

5. **Facilitating Change**

6. **Research and Development**

The eight sub-committees within ACRE are:

- Agriculture [A]
- Resource [R]
- Agri-Value [AV]
- Farm Structure Farm Income [FSFI].
- Rural Manufacturing and Construction [RMC]
- Community in Evolution [CIE]
- Rural Services [RS]
- Tools of Economic Development [EC].

In providing the recommendations we have identified, using parenthesis, the sub-committee from which the respective recommendation originated.

ACRE SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS - FEBRUARY 2002

1. COMPETITIVENESS

Saskatchewan is part of the global economy and therefore must offer a competitive business climate if it wishes to establish, grow and retain local businesses as well attract businesses from out-of-province. In addition, there is clearly a need to provide an environment to ensure that all people can participate in the on-going economic well-being of the province. To that end, a comprehensive business strategy for Saskatchewan must be developed that creates an environment that is stable in which individuals, communities and businesses are willing to make long-term investments.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

- Conducts a **comprehensive review to assess the province's competitiveness.**

1.1 Taxation recommendations

- Explores the adoption of **a "Saskatchewan Value-Added Tax Credit"** by December 2002. (AV)

- Ensures **consistency in taxation of all rural municipalities** and specifically, the application of punitive mill rates. (R)

- Explores the potential for a **special youth tax structure** as a means of encouraging youth to stay in or relocate to Saskatchewan to start businesses and families. (FSFI)

- Takes steps to **alleviate the current education tax burden on farmland.** (FSFI) (CIE)

- Examines the **use of the fuel tax exclusively for road maintenance and construction** in the province. (RMC)

- **Reduces the reliance of educational funding** on the property tax base by completing the major review of the Foundation Operating Grant and increasing the funding for education out of provincial revenues. (CIE)

- Promotes **machinery or land cooperatives**, or collaborative ventures that promote the shared use of specialized equipment, through a more favourable tax environment. (FSFI)

- **Implements a dedicated consumer tax to provide funding for tourism product development and marketing**; specifically for rural-based opportunities in aboriginal, agricultural, cultural and ecological tourism. (RS)

- Implements a **taxation incentive/assistance program to help older farmers pass on the land** to a succeeding generation. (FSFI)

1.2 Regulations

- Applies a **consistent set of regulations on the use of roads in all rural municipalities** (business, farm and private) particularly in the application of road haul agreements. (RMC) (R)

- Provides the support necessary to have agricultural industry-wide policies and practices that **enhance competitiveness through food safety and environmental practices** (consistent with other jurisdictions). (A)

1.3 Labour & Immigration Recommendations

- Collaborates with organized labour and industry to review and/or establish the measures necessary to **create a positive, competitive and progressive labour environment** including a fair, equitable and effective workers compensation program in Saskatchewan. (AV)

- Actively encourages immigrant producers that have experience in growing products which take full advantage of irrigation opportunities. (A).

- Allows migrant workers into the province to assist horticulture producers to harvest their crops (From discussions at ACRE).

1.4 Investment Recommendations

- Establishes the **Saskatchewan Opportunities Foundation** to provide funding of grants, loan guarantees, scholarship and leadership training through public and private funds, private investment/tax credits and revisions to the PST. (CIE)

- Develops and leads an **Agri-business Investment Strategy** that includes:
    1. Developing existing and attracting new agri-business in the province; and
    2. **Establishing Business Assistance Teams** to assist firms with location analysis, accessing equity and debt financing, navigating the regulatory requirements, determining/negotiating business costs (i.e. utilities, accessing programs and overall problem solving.) (AV)

1.5 Aboriginal Participation

- Works cooperatively at all levels with Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Metis and Non-status) to foster a **shared understanding of our vision for the province**. (CIE)

- **Engages the Aboriginal people in the work force** that includes expansion of aboriginal ownership of businesses either from a First Nations' owned business view or in partnership with the private sector. (RMC) (CIE)

- Initiates discussions with the Government of Canada, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan to provide mechanisms for **Aboriginal people and their communities to access federal programs** and services initiated at the provincial level.

- Begins the process of **removing barriers to provincial programs and initiatives** in order to enhance First Nations participation.

- Implements policies that **encourage the private and public sector to forge partnerships with Aboriginal organizations.** (ED)

- Establishes and implements targeted, set aside policies for Aboriginal providers of goods and services. (ED)

2. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Building a competitive environment will also depend on the development of a skilled labour force within the province of Saskatchewan. Many companies have identified the problem of not only access to labour but also access to the specific skills in the labour force.

In addition, ACRE believes that the province's long-term economic growth depends on our youth. We must ensure that strong ties can be created with the education and business communities in order to reap the benefits of a bumper crop of youthful ideas.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

2.1 Education & Training

- **Promotes careers in the trades** in order to provide a greater number of skilled professionals to the various sectors of the economy. (RMC)

- Identifies and provides opportunities for businesses to **assess and build their entrepreneurial, leadership and management skills** in areas of confidence building, entrepreneurial spirit, global vision and knowledge in financing and marketing. (AV) (RMC)

- Develops and expands **distance education and technology** so that options for learning can be made available to school children who face extended busing on a daily basis. (RS)

- **Utilizes the expertise of local people and** the availability of local private sector **facilities in the delivery of education programs** where such expertise and facilities are not readily available within the education system. (RS)

- Engages the Department of Education, Department of Economic and Co-operative Development, the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce, the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation, Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), and the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan among others, in the **development and implementation of a curriculum** component for the

primary and secondary system that is dedicated to **business/entrepreneurship education**. (ED)

- Examines the **impact of the current education governance structure** on system efficiency and decision-making. (FSFI)

- **Increases resources available for training people** for a career in agriculture and rural businesses. (FSFI)

- **Provides funding for** comprehensive community-based leadership **training to build local capacity to position the community for change (easily accessible and builds on existing modules/programs).** (AV, RMC, CIE)

2.2 Mentorship

- Utilizes existing resources to establish a "Venture Management" initiative that would **match experienced managers with new or expanding agri-businesses**. (AV)

3. INFRASTRUCTURE

The infrastructure provided by the province will play a key element in the emerging economy. Key elements will include linking Saskatchewan with emerging distribution hubs and linking our major centers. Key principles to be followed include competitiveness and efficiency.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

- Develops a plan **for infrastructure built around key irrigation sites** such as, but not limited to, Lake Diefenbaker, the Rafferty and Alameda Reservoirs and the South Saskatchewan River that includes synchronized public and private investment. (R)

- **Invests in the infrastructure that is needed to accompany agricultural producers in transition** into new sectors which may include (FSFI):
  i. encouraging development of related sectors along logical corridors;
  ii. providing financial support for water development for livestock operations, incorporating necessary environmental principles of sustainability, health and safety; and
  iii. providing financial assistance through loans or incentives for development of necessary facilities for livestock or specialized crops (vegetables, herbs, organics, berries, etc.).

3.1 Transportation Recommendations

- Develops and implements a **strategy that integrates the road, rail and air services** in the province to support business development and includes

working with the municipal governments **to improve the co-ordination and integration of planning the permanent municipal road and provincial highways system.** (RS) (RMC)

3.2 *Utilities' Recommendations*

- Ensures **the installation of 3-phase power, gas and telephone lines** to rural Saskatchewan. (RMC)

- Provides **access to high-speed phone lines and cellular coverage** in order to keep pace with new technology. (RMC)

3.3 Irrigation Development Recommendations

- Adopts an **aggressive policy towards irrigation development** that expands utilization of the current irrigation system and further development in order to open new areas for diversified agricultural growth. (A)

3.4 Water-Waste Management Recommendations

Develops options that ensure a **practical and economically feasible water treatment, distribution and wastewater management infrastructure in the province** (e.g. distribution of raw water to households with their own treatment systems. User-pay and community based decision making must be key principles in the decision process). (RS)

3.5 Land Use Recommendations

- Establishes the legislative, regulatory and policy framework that is consistent and fair and that **encourages the sustainable non-traditional and, where possible, multi-use of Crown lands** for the benefit of rural residents and that leases issued contain clauses allowing for integrated multiple uses by the lease owner. (R)

- In conjunction with local governments, develops a land use planning process that takes a balanced approach to land management in the province and establishes **fair and consistent rules with respect to land use** for the province. (R)

3.6 Organizational Development Recommendations

- Creates a **Rural Opportunities Office** to develop and implement a long-term, comprehensive, action plan for rural Saskatchewan. (Rural Revitalization Office be renamed the Rural Opportunities Office.) (CIE)

- Encourages and **enables the emergence of "Opportunity Regions"** from the grassroots in rural Saskatchewan to alleviate the multiplicity of regional boundaries and to foster community and economic development. (CIE)

a. As *part of this process*, it is recommended that the province establish a voluntary program that encourages municipalities in a region to cooperate in a Reeves-mayor's council similar to that initiated under the Regional Parks Program. For example, under this program, the council could qualify for assistance (financial and technical) to establish a coordinating office and coordinating opportunities fund. (ED)

b. It is also recommended that the government of Saskatchewan along with the Government of Canada examine the concept of developing co-terminus boundaries as a means to create a more conducive and comprehensive environment for their service delivery and rural community and economic development. (ED)

- Conducts a **review of the programs implemented in Ireland** to assist in the development of business start-ups to determine the applicability of the programs to rural Saskatchewan. (ED)

4. SECTOR SPECIFIC

Opportunities abound in specific sectors in rural Saskatchewan that will add to the growth of the province's GDP. In order to realize the potential in identified sectors, specific issues must be addressed.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

4.1 Agriculture Sector

- Moves forward on the **development of a feeding industry** to complement the grains and oilseeds' sector by ensuring that financing, regulatory impediments, environmental sensitivity and leadership are addressed. (A)

- Expands efforts to facilitate **increased forage production**. (FSFI)

- Ensures **a broad based organic strategy is developed. (A)**

- Assists in the industry-driven establishment and implementation of a national accreditation system for the organic sector. (A)

- **Utilizes agricultural Crown land as a tool to enhance the livestock industry** by: (R)
    i. encouraging the conversion of marginal cultivated agricultural Crown land to perennial forage;
    ii. examining the development of an infrastructure program that would provide Crown land tenants the means to construct required facilities on lands being converted to perennial forage;
    iii. Change current Crown land use policy to maximize potential whether through sales or lease (e.g. community projects or private individuals).

- **Expands the Livestock Loan Guarantee Program** (bison females, feedlot program, expanded dollars in existing program). (FSFI)

- Develops a **central registry of available service providers** and producers' demand for services to facilitate a more effective use of agriculture resources. (FSFI)

- Examines available options for **assisting producers** such as loan guarantees in other areas, interest subsidies or tax incentives for those **in transition to sustainable production systems**. (FSFI)

- **Provides linkages between products and technical expertise** on market information, market access and development issues. (FSFI)

4.2 Rural Manufacturing and Construction

- Explores the concept of **"business clusters" for the rural manufacturing and construction sector**. (RMC)

- Promotes the rural manufacturing and construction sector to the people of Saskatchewan about its contribution to the community. (RMC)

4.3 Health and Emergency Services' Recommendations

- **Enhances the province's emergency services** to provide rural residents with effective emergency services and speedy access that will ensure delivery of services in a coordinated, integrated and multi-disciplinary team basis. (RS) (CIE)

4.4 Energy Sector Recommendations

- Takes substantive action, including the fuel tax rebate and other positive financial measures to support the development of the ethanol and biofuel industry that would closely align Saskatchewan with other provinces in Canada. (November 8 & 9, 2001 ACRE meeting)

- Works with other provincial jurisdictions in western Canada to develop a coordinated marketing approach to encourage gas wholesalers and retailers to make ethanol and biofuel blended fuels readily available to all residents. (November 8 & 9, 2001 ACRE meeting)

- Mandate increasing levels of ethanol and biofuels content with defined timelines and coordinated with the production capacity within Saskatchewan. (November 8 & 9, 2001 ACRE meeting)

- Invests significantly in **research aimed at reducing fuel consumption and development of alternative fuel sources.** (FSFI)

5. FACILITATING CHANGE

We live in a millennium of change where individuals and sectors will be challenged to prepare for that change. The key will be to ensure that the changes are significant and sustainable.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

- In conjunction with all provincial associations/organizations and media, develops and commits to an **action plan that builds positive attitudes** and promotes the attributes of rural Saskatchewan. (ED)

6. RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

As a basis for the birth of new activity in the province, the government must invest in publicly accessible applied research and development.

ACRE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan:

- Invests a maximum amount of available government dollars into **publicly accessible applied research and development that will provide the greatest benefits in opportunity areas, education, and technology transfer for the industry.** (FSFI)

- **Invests in research in farming practices** that help farmers better utilize land and energy resources (e.g. integration of livestock and field crop production to reduce reliance on synthetic fertillzers). (FSFI)

ACRE Interim Recommendations – January 25, 2001

1. Access to capital funding

That the government should improve access to capital funding by:

- Establishing an Agriculture Venture Capital Fund aimed at stimulating new capital investment in large farm related and value-added agriculture;
- Establishing an Enterprise Investment Fund that would enable equity investment into new or expanded agri-business by smaller groups of interested investors in a local community;
- Establishing a loan guarantee program for the feedlot industry, similar to the Livestock Loan Guarantee Program; and

- Investigating the development of an Adjustment/Transition Rural Development Fund aimed at smaller on-farm diversification business enterprises that could assist with generational transfers and rural development.

2. Rural Skills Development Program

That the provincial government, in co-operation with the federal government, place a priority on establishing a skills development program designed to help producers to remain in rural Saskatchewan by:

- Assisting producers in improving their farm management skills (such as expanded extension/technology transfer activities);
- Assisting producers in adjusting their enterprise into new agricultural opportunity areas (such as education/business planning/mentoring);
- Assisting producers by improving their opportunities for off-farm employment (such as skills training through green certificate programs, SIAST, regional colleges, universities; and
- Assisting producers to develop the skills necessary for full-time employment should they choose to exit farming.

3. Approval Process Guide for Rural Development Projects

That the Government of Saskatchewan facilitate rural development by implementing:

- An on-going regulatory review to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of all regulations;
- A timely process to examine specific regulatory issues raised by those involved in industry;
- A mechanism to guide proponents through the approval process; and
- An ombudsman to serve as an independent, third party adjudicator of disputes for agriculture and agri-food.

All levels of governments will commit to clear standards of accountability for development projects.

4. Communication Infrastructure

That the federal and provincial governments take necessary actions, including increased funding, to provide universal, affordable access to high speed Internet and cell phone coverage to all residents throughout Saskatchewan.

5. Immigration Policy

That the Government of Saskatchewan should devote more resources to the immigration file. Among the areas that the province should concentrate on include the following:

- Ensure that the current Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) is fully utilized with a more aggressive marketing approach;
- Make the PNP a permanent agreement and negotiate with the federal government to increase the number of nominees (as the province feels necessary) under a future PNP;
- Ensure that the needs of the agricultural and rural sectors be taken into account as the province considers broadening the scope of skills it will consider under the PNP.

It is recommended that the Government of Saskatchewan discuss with the federal government a Federal/Saskatchewan agreement on migrant workers similar to agreements in other provinces.

6. Education/Publicity Program on Rural Saskatchewan Successes and Competitive Position

That the Government of Saskatchewan make a commitment to a major public education program aimed specifically at Saskatchewan that emphasizes our rural strengths and resiliency and the facts about our competitiveness with other provinces – to be contracted through a third party.

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